

Safeguarding documentary heritage – the Polish Memory of the World

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Abstract:

Poland is a country which is not only rich in heritage, but has also suffered perhaps more than most from its destruction. As such, it has been a natural supporter of UNESCO's work in the field, engaging with the Memory of the World Programme from 1992. It has found that both the international and national registers have been an important way of drawing attention to documentary heritage and the issue of this heritage preservation and accessibility.

UNESCO's 2015 Recommendation on documentary heritage has also provided an important call for heritage preservation to be seen as a global priority, given that heritage itself is global.

The challenge now is to ensure the continued relevance of this work, encouraging research into, and use of, documentary heritage that has been saved for the future.

Keywords: cultural heritage, UNESCO, Memory of the World, preservation, access.

Let me first comment a little on the title of my presentation, proposed by the organisers. The Memory of the World is the UNESCO programme in the fields of documentary heritage preservation, accessibility and promotion. It is worldwide and belongs to all UNESCO Member States. And, I must add, to professionals, experts, as it is expert-driven and expert-oriented, which is its highly important feature. A similar comment should be made concerning the “memory of the world” written in small letters: it belongs to all and it is created by all. However, it is also obvious, there are many “memories of the world”, not only national memories or other collective memories of the world but individual, personal ones; everybody who knows something about and reflects upon the world in diachronic categories has her or his own memory of the world; and there are many collective memories, of course. So, I will try to present some Polish perspectives and experiences related to the UNESCO programme and, inevitably, to the phenomenon of the memory of the world itself. I will try to explain the reasons for our engagement in the Programme and discuss some forms of that engagement.

¹ For this presentation I used extensively my article “Poland and UNESCO documentary heritage” (World Heritage, no. 84: Special Issue, July 2017, pp. 96-100) and its larger version published as “The involvement of Poland in UNESCO activities regarding documentary heritage” published (in English and Polish; translation: firma Paweł Pilch) in the “Heritage in Poland”, a supplement to the Ochrona Zabytków review, Warsaw 2017, pp. 193-190.

What I am going to present is a number of observations and reflections from the perspective of my experience at Polish National Commission for UNESCO and at Polish Committee of the Memory of the World Programme. Thus, it will be only a Polish perspective... one of many possible ones.

My country has been involved in the MoW Programme since its establishment in 1992. The International Advisory Committee (IAC) is the Programme's body that advises UNESCO Director-General on the Programme's activities, decisions etc. The First Meeting of the IAC took place in 1993 in Pułtusk (near Warsaw, in the Mazovia region). I think in his speech in Pułtusk the UNESCO Director-General at the time, Professor Federico Mayor, captured a great deal of the rationale **why the Programme is much valued in Poland** when he pointed out that 95% of the collections of the Central Archive of Historical Records in Warsaw, a core memory institution in Poland, had been lost as result of the second world war... I think it is an appealing illustration of the general situation of Poland's documentary heritage. We lost enormous parts of it especially during WW2 and also as a consequence of the partitions of Poland at the end of the 18th century. So, we know quite "tangibly" what it means to lose the heritage of this kind. Such images as the fire of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo, in August 1992, had to make a particularly strong impression in Poland.

There is also another, complementary, historical experience that contributes to Polish appreciation of documentary heritage and the Programme, namely, that of maintaining the political and cultural identity by Polish people throughout the Partition period thanks to the preservation of their cultural tradition and collective memory, which made it possible for Poland to regain independence in 1918, after 123 years of subjugation.

And, of course, today, with the development of digital technologies, however such dangers as wars and other natural and man-made, intended or unintended, disasters remain particularly urgent, also the challenges related to the ICTs development are of core importance: such as those of long-term preservation and accessibility of the digital heritage (selection criteria and policies, emulation issues, legal issues related to privacy, to copyright, metadata, etc.).

Happily, I think, with the development of the ICTs some reservations regarding the very term "memory of the world" seem to disappear. "Isn't the "memory of the world" a utopia?...", "memory of the world" – but does such a thing exist at all?" "Is it not an absurd to speak about a memory of the world when we can everywhere observe so many divergent, contradictory, particular "memories"?" ... a few years ago questions or comments of this kind could be heard as a reaction to the name of UNESCO's programme which thus looked even provocative (or, maybe, prophetic?); presently they seem to be much less frequent.

The advances in communication, the exchange of information and knowledge, the establishment of new global links and relationships – all they explain why today reservations of this kind seem to evade; social communication becomes global and contributes to dissemination of content, to a "globalisation of information" of a kind, and to the rise of an awareness which is common worldwide or among vast groups of people, or among smaller milieus of professionals, experts, intellectuals, artists, bloggers, activists, "scattered" in the world and influencing the public opinion.

As a consequence, also the collective and individual memories are extended by the inclusion of awareness of different, even very distant, societies and cultures and their historical experience, systems of values, lifestyles, sensitivities, etc. Thus, it becomes possible to speak of a common "memory of the world", which is obviously very varied and whose establishment is of course accompanied by reverse processes of fragmentation of knowledge and new amnesia.

In these circumstances, the specific value of documentary heritage lies in its special connection with the memory it reveals as information heritage par excellence. Here also lies a great potential of UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme and of the registers of documentary heritage developed within the Programme: the international Register, as well as the regional and national ones.

Memory is here at stake – but also history as critical, because based on methodology and evidence of historical sources, reflection on the past and on the memory itself. The historical reflection in this sense enables better understanding of different perspectives, of different people and peoples, and advancing dialogue while founding it on knowledge. The “historical sources” are “documents” (in a broad sense of the term). This rather obvious observation further emphasises the importance of documentary heritage in our times.

The 2015 Recommendation

This observation also further highlights the significance of the 2015 Recommendation concerning the preservation of, and access to, documentary heritage including in digital form² being an important achievement of UNESCO. Albeit belonging to the domain of “soft law”, it is the first and, to date, the only global legal instrument that specifically addresses the issue of documentary heritage. Yes, it is a non-binding, “soft law” instrument, however, while encouraging and shaping policy making it can play an important role to improve preservation of documentary heritage, access to it and related cooperation. UNESCO Member States are obliged to report on its implementation every four years.

Not only for this formal reason but also because of its content it is a useful instrument to advocate, inspire and foster national policies as well as international cooperation at various levels. Many of the provisions of the Recommendation concern this cooperation of particular significance in the age of digital technologies that enormously facilitate circulation of content and e.g. enable the sharing of digital copies of analogue documents but also stipulate interoperability, common standards, extensive multistakeholder cooperation regarding long-term preservation of the digital heritage, legal issues, etc. An important role of regional and international professional associations, institutions and organisations is emphasised in the instrument (cf. its par. 5.2).

The Recommendation is a particular success of the Memory of the World Programme, for not only did the idea and motivation for the creation of this document come from the experts collaborating within its framework but also its content reflects attitudes and concepts embodied by the Programme and presented in its groundwork document, *Memory of the World. General Guidelines to Safeguard Documentary Heritage* (revised edition, 2002). The framework of many of those concepts had already been delineated in 1993 during the 1st IAC Meeting inaugurating the operation of the Programme. It includes a broad definition of “documentary heritage” as a term encompassing objects with widely varying content and carriers. The *General Guidelines*, as well as the entire MoW Programme, are currently undergoing a serious review process. However, I would not expect this broad concept of documentary heritage could be challenged.

In the Recommendation, definitions may indeed deserve attention. The term “document” has been intrinsically linked to the analogue or digital informational content and carrier. Critically, in an age of digital technologies, the definition of document points out that “The relationship between content and carrier may range from incidental to integral”. In its turn, the definition of documentary heritage stresses its global importance and the common nature of the responsibility for it, the requirement for its full preservation and protection, and ensuring its permanent accessibility and the possibility of re-using it “for all”. Also the definition of “memory institution” as introduced in the Recommendation is purposely of a broad and open nature (“Memory institutions may include, but are not limited to, archives, libraries, museums and other educational, cultural and research organizations”).

I will not expand my presentation on the Recommendation provisions, as most probably you know them much better than I. Let me only point out to some values and directions it promotes, such as the empowerment and independence of memory institutions in the fields of preservation and access as a requirement of social trust; participation of memory institutions and civil society (and other

² Link to the Recommendation:

http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=49358&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

stakeholders) in formulation of preservation and access policies and international standards, or the cooperation regarding shared and entangled heritage.

For already mentioned reasons (first global legal instrument on documentary heritage, an important tool for preservation policies and cooperation, also within the MoW Programme, as well as to fully use the Programme's potential) Poland and Polish experts actively promoted the idea of the Recommendation and supported its elaboration process.

The discussion held at the 4th International Conference of the Memory of the World Programme organised in 2011 in Warsaw (and titled "Culture-Memory-Identities") largely contributed to strengthening the belief that an international recommendation would meet the needs, increasingly urgent nowadays, related to the preservation of documentary heritage and ensuring its permanent and universal accessibility.

The MoW registers

Another success of the MoW Programme are the MoW registers, developed since 1997, listing documentary heritage of particular international, regional or national importance. They can be regarded as important instruments allowing the Memory of the World Programme to influence social consciousness: to promote understanding of universal value of the heritage of each people, to help people appreciating their documentary heritage and remember their collective experiences of the past, as well as to raise the awareness of the importance of preservation of documentary heritage and its transmission to future generations and the needs which must be met to that end at policy level.

The importance of the Memory of the World registers was quickly appreciated in Poland. Since the Polish Committee for the Memory of the World Programme was established in 1996, the most conspicuous aspect of its activity has been related specifically to the registers: the international Register, and then, since 2014, also the Polish national one.

According to the *General Guidelines* of the Programme, the international Register comprises heritage that meets the criterion of "world influence". So far, 14 items (single objects and collections) of Polish documentary heritage have been included on the Register. Their diversity can be illustrated by the first three Polish inscriptions dating from the year 1999: the autograph of the epoch-making work *De revolutionibus* (kept at the Jagiellonian Library of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow), in which Nicolaus Copernicus laid out his heliocentric theory; the autographs of musical scores and letters by Fryderyk Chopin (preserved at the National Library and the Fryderyk Chopin Institute in Warsaw), and the underground archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, after the name of its initiator known as the Emanuel Ringelblum Archive (preserved at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw). The subsequent Polish inscriptions include i.a. the boards with Twenty-One Demands of Gdańsk, August 1980 (owned by the National Maritime Museum in Gdańsk and exhibited at the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk), the most important preserved document of the historic strike in Gdańsk Shipyard, together with the collection entitled "The birth of the Solidarity Trades Union – A Massive Social Movement" (preserved by the Karta Centre in Warsaw); internationally important documents related to the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, such as the Confederation of Warsaw (preserved at the Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw) ensuring as early as in 1573 the religious tolerance as a foundation of political system of the state; emigration documents of international importance, and so forth. There are two inscriptions of joint, transnational character, nominated together with other countries: the Codex Suprasliensis (a Polish-Russian-Slovenian joint nomination; the part of the Codex preserved in Poland is kept at the National Library in Warsaw), and the Radzwill's Archives and Niasvizh (Nieśwież) Library Collection (a Belarusian-Finnish-Lithuanian-Polish-Russian-Ukrainian joint nomination; the part of the inscribed collection kept in Poland is preserved at the Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw).

The Polish National Register of the Memory of the World Programme, that has gone through two editions so far, attracts a particular interest among the media and general audience. Presently, it comprises 22 items of diversified character, of particular importance for Polish history, culture and

identity. It started with the Constitution of the 3rd May 1791 (preserved at the Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw), one of the first modern constitutions worldwide, and the last great achievement of the Old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that played a particularly important role consolidating Polish people and inspiring Polish political thought in the period of the Partitions of Poland and still has an important symbolic value.

The popularity of Polish National Register in Poland is owed to several factors. One of them is a solemn character of the ceremonies of proclamation of items inscribed within each of the two editions: each time, in 2014 and in 2016, it was held at the Presidential Palace in Warsaw, with the involvement of high level State authorities. It was accompanied with exhibitions and open days at the Presidential Palace.

What is particularly important, events – exhibitions and meetings – were organised also in several places where the inscribed items are kept and which are historically related to those items: cities, towns and sometimes villages. It reveals the social significance and potential of documentary heritage and the MoW registers in consolidating local communities and revitalising the memory of their past. Many items inscribed on Polish Register are obviously quite known to large parts of the general public from school education. However, many of them are reminded to people and even “discovered” in a sense because of their inscription on the register, ceremonies, exhibitions, discussions and media interviews. Short films produced by the Head Office of State Archives presenting the heritage inscribed on Polish register were broadcasted on public TV (a website of the register is hosted by the Head Office, where the films are available also in versions with English subtitles).

Similar impact, at national and local scale, can be observed in case of inscriptions on the international Register.

No need to argue, this “revitalising the memory” and raising general awareness dimension should not be neglected from the point of view of preservation policies and the capacities and profile of memory institutions and professional circles, as much depends on favourable public atmosphere around documentary heritage and the need for its preservation, on their understanding by broader audience and broader circles of decision makers.

The **Polish Memory of the World Committee** plays a crucial role in the process of nominating Polish heritage to the international Register, as well as encouraging the nominations to the national one, and selecting the items for inclusion on the national register.

It is an expert body, acting on voluntary basis, consisting of representatives of key memory institutions in Poland, such as the National Library or the Head Office of State Archives, academics, and professionals involved in cooperation within the MoW Programme. It is chaired by the General Director of State Archives of Poland. The Head Office of State Archives also provides organisation support and the Committee’s secretariat. The cooperation with Polish National Commission for UNESCO is obviously extensive.

When the committee was created, one of its first endeavours was to identify Polish heritage that could fulfil the criteria of inclusion on the international Register. In response to a questionnaire sent out to archives, libraries and museums throughout the country, over 300 proposals were submitted out of which some 25 objects (single items and collections) were identified by the committee as applicable.

As mentioned, the activities regarding the registers have been the most visible dimension of Polish Committee of the Memory of the World Programme; however, it also plays an important role in all other aspects of Poland’s involvement in cooperation within the Programme: such as Poland’s position within its current review process or Polish initiatives aiming to strengthen the Programme, or organisation of the Programme’s international events when they take place in Poland. Cooperation with other national MoW committees or bodies is also of vital importance.

Let me close this presentation with a brief list. **MoW from a Polish perspective – a success story?** And if, as I am convinced, it is successful, what are its main advantages? And what challenges should it face? Let me start with the latter:

Challenges – but also some promising developments:

- it seems more constant or continuous work as a platform/forum for professional exchanges and cooperation among various stakeholders, different memory institutions over long-term preservation, access and promotion, leading to “tangible” results would be important to fully use the programme as a catalyst of UNESCO’s convening power. In the important field of the digital heritage, the PERSIST (Platform to Enhance the Sustainability of the Information Society Transglobally)³ project seems to open important horizons from this point of view,
- a need for greater research and educational impact; there are valuable activities developed in recent years by the IAC Sub-Committee on Education and Research, especially in Germany and Asia-Pacific Region (for more information and/or the Sub-Committee’s materials its Chairperson, Professor Lothar Jordan can be contacted by email available at the SCEaR’s website⁴),
- presentation of documentary heritage inscribed on the registers, especially on the international one; evidently, it is largely a question of resources and any expectations should be realistic; at the same time, it seems to be a part of a more general question of online promotion and presentation of the heritage, of all its kinds, and not only of the heritage inscribed on UNESCO lists/registers. What can be done? There are important initiatives, such as EUROPEANA or World Digital Library. Is it possible to bring together digitally the heritage listed on different UNESCO and non-UNESCO lists or registers, by means of interlinking it? How to best promote it (and the sites presenting it online)?

Advantages:

- the Programme’s and its registers’ impact on general awareness (including the decision makers),
- the registers’ impact on collective memory (memories) and reflection,
- the Programme’s role as a forum of professional exchanges and cooperation on best practices and standards; being a challenge, it is already a success as well: the work over the 2015 Recommendation (and the result!) is a valuable example in this respect; MoW International Conferences and such meetings as Vancouver conference on digital heritage (“The Memory of the World in the Digital Age: Digitization and Preservation”) in 2012 also illustrate the Programme’s value.

The 2015 Recommendation can and should be a major guidance and guideline for further cooperation within the MoW Programme – and let it be my last remark and conclusion...

Thank you for your attention.

³ Link to the PERSIST website: <https://unescopersist.org/>

⁴ Link to the SCEaR’s website: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/about-the-programme/international-advisory-committee-iac/sub-committee-on-education-and-research/>